

parallel worlds by orphan_account

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Summary:

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It feels like one of those *Which one doesn't belong?* questions on their grammar tests.

The answer isn't any of those options—it's Will himself, in Jonathan's old formal clothes that don't quite fit because Will's always been tiny compared to him, next to Mike in his nice shirt and tie and sweater and blazer.

But here's the thing: Will Byers would probably always stand next to Mike Wheeler, no matter how crowded the room and how ill-fitting his clothes.

Here's the thing: Mike Wheeler is the one who encourages him to dance with the girl with the kind smile (the girl who calls him "zombie boy", which hurts even though it's obviously affectionate) with a little nudge and quirk of his eyebrows like *What are you waiting for?*

Here's the thing: Will Byers glances over her shoulder the whole time, and watches with a bitter taste in his mouth as Mike Wheeler dances with Eleven.

"El's not stupid! It's not my fault you don't like girls!"

Yes, *it is*, every cell of Will's body screams, never to be heard.

"Do you remember the first time we met?"

Will is six years old, seated at the swingset but not quite swinging, legs too short for his feet to touch the muddy ground beneath, all alone.

"It was... It was the first day of kindergarten."

His mom hadn't dropped him off because the second she stepped out of the house his dad started screaming, so he'd biked to school with Jonathan. Jonathan walked him to his classroom, the only person there who wasn't either in kindergarten or a parent.

"I knew nobody."

Will doesn't have close neighbors, especially not ones who are his age.

"I had no friends, and... I just felt so alone, and so scared, but..."

His only friends are his mother and brother.

"I saw you on the swings and you were alone, too."

The sounds of chatter and singing and screeching and crying surrounds him. He is the quietest thing on this playground, quieter than the rustling trees.

"You were just swinging by yourself."

Will stares at his shoes, knocks his toes together absently, making the swing knock from side to side.

"And I just walked up to you and I asked."

A boy comes up to Will. He's wearing a white polo and jeans and a jacket that actually fits him. Will doesn't look at his face even though he's sure it's impolite, just stares at the little train embroidered on his chest. None of the kids who have approached him at school have been kind, with their perfect clothes and perfect parents and perfect lives, so why will he?

"I asked if you wanted to be my friend."

Will's eyes snap to the boy's face. He looks serious, and sad, and lonely. He has freckles and messy windblown hair, so unlike the rest of his prim appearance, and Will realized maybe he isn't like everyone else here.

"And you said yes."

It tastes strange in his mouth, but the boy beams and takes a seat on the swing next to his and suddenly Will can't imagine saying anything else to him.

"You said yes."

He doesn't say anything else, just watches as the boy digs his toes into the mud with slight envy, smile plastered to his face like Will has made his entire year by agreeing to be his friend.

"It was the best thing I've ever done."

When they walk into the school when recess ends, they're side-by-side. Jonathan is thrilled to hear all about Will's new best friend Mike Wheeler, and listens to Will chatter excitedly about him all the way home.

Mike tells him they'll spy on the monster in his head, because Mike is a storyteller and a believer and a hoper, and when Will's hands shake with fear, Mike covers them with his own.

Mike protects. Mike cares.

Will wonders if the shadow monster is the only monster in his body.

Will knows Lucas and Dustin have both been watching Mad Max for a while now, knows that they're trying to befriend her because she's the new girl and she's good at video games.

But Will also knows that someone will be hurt out of the three of them, and it's not likely to be Max. He knows that both Dustin and Lucas, who have always been so different (Lucas the kind but blunt realist, Dustin the snarky optimist), are both chasing the same girl instead of just watching from afar.

Mike hasn't quite noticed.

Honestly, Will's not sure the rest of them have either.

Which brings him to the present: Halloween, 1984, a videocamera in his hand and Mike at his left and Max and Lucas and Dustin chattering excitedly as they walk in front.

"Did you agree to this?" Mike asks, and Will lets the hand with the camera drop so he can look at him properly.

"What?" he responds.

"To her. Joining our Party."

He glances between the three and Mike. "It's just for Halloween."

"You should have checked with me."

"Well, they were excited." Something twists in his stomach. He isn't used to disagreeing with Mike. "I guess I thought you'd be okay with it."

"She's ruining the best night of the year," says Mike, and with that, walks ahead without him.

Will thinks it's sort of unfair Mike is blaming him for Max joining. Actually, Will thinks it's sort of unfair Mike's blaming anyone for Max joining, as if it's a negative. He wonders if it's got something to do with the girl who saved him last year. He knows they were close, but he can't see why that means Mike wouldn't want *any* girls in their group. Will thinks Max is really cool, not that it matters to anyone else.

"Watch it, Zombie Boy," some guy with a painted face growls, jumping out at him, and Will snaps out of his thoughts enough to gasp and backtrack.

"Trick or treat, freak!" another screams.

"Boo!"

Will stumbles away and falls on his back, the camera crashing against the ground. He looks from side to side, the music and ambient chatter

from the street replaced with a low rumble, and sees nothing but trees and houses and little particles floating in the air.

He sucks in a breath, turns over, and stands up.

No.

Will is in the Upside Down again, all alone.

"Mike?" he calls, because he knows Jonathan wanted him to stick by Mike's side. "Mike!"

He hears chittering, and surveys his surroundings frantically. There are trees, houses, abandoned cars. It is quiet and lonely and not quite right.

And then the monster from his nightmares rises ominously into the sky, and a cold sort of dread fills Will's stomach as it goes higher and higher, tendril-like arms planting themselves in the trees, its faceless face leaning forward.

He runs.

He dodges outstretched branches and pushes aside fences and stumbles down steps until he's hidden behind a little half-wall of brick. He makes himself as small as he can, curling up into a ball and breathing heavily, praying he won't be found.

The monster screams, and so does he.

"Will!"

Something touches his arm, and all he can think is *nonotnowithasmeitgotme* as he tries to scramble away.

"Will, what's wrong?" the voice says, catching him by both of his shoulders firmly.

Will can do nothing except breathe heavily and look around. The Upside Down is gone, along with the monster, and he's back on the street. The voice is Mike's, looking at him with worry etched into his face.

"I couldn't find you! Are you hurt?" he asks.

"Holy shit!" Dustin exclaims as he runs up.

"Is he okay?" Lucas asks.

"I don't know," says Mike, and Will is too out of it to really process what they're saying. He starts whimpering, and Mike tightens his grip and stands him up. "I'm gonna get you home, okay? I'm gonna get you home. Hold on."

"All right, take it easy," someone's saying, and then there are more hands and more faces.

"I got him," Mike says strongly, and they back off.

There's some sort of scuffle, some sort of disagreement. Will can't catch all of it, tries to focus on the weight of Mike's arm over his shoulders and his feet on the pavement and the lights and people passing him by as Mike steers him home but keeps slipping back, wondering if he's really alone and it's all in his head.

"Hey," says Mike softly. Will feels himself jerk, then realized they're standing at the door to Mike's basement.

"Sorry," he says.

"Don't apologize," is Mike's flippant reply, and Will doesn't know what to say to that except *sorry* again so he just keeps his mouth shut and follows him inside.

They both dump their candy out on the coffeetable in unison. Mike laughs delightedly as some of it spills off the edge of the table, and Will can't help but smile at that. The mirth dies down, though, and even as they sit on the sofa, side by side, Will feels like Mike's waiting for something.

"It's like... like I'm stuck," he finally offers as a means of explanation.

"Like, stuck in the Upside Down?"

He sighs, then wishes he hadn't. It feels ungrateful, somehow, to sigh

when all Mike's trying to do is understand. "No," he says, suddenly wanting to make it all make sense. For Mike. For himself. "You know on a View Master, when it gets, like..."

"Caught between two slides?"

Will glances at Mike to gauge his expression, but he just looks blank, so he looks away. "Yeah, yeah, like that. Like one side's our world and the other..." His hands shake as he gestures. "The other slide is the Upside Down."

There's a pause. Mike swallows.

"And..." He sees the Upside Down every time he blinks, so he keeps his eyes open wide, but it doesn't drive away the noise ringing in his ears. "And there was this noise. Coming from everywhere. And then I saw something."

"The Demogorgon?"

Will doesn't look at him. "No. It was like.... This huge shadow in the sky. Only it was alive. And it was coming for me."

"Is this all real?" Mike sounds scared, although Will's not sure if he's scared for himself or for Will. "Or is it like the doctors said, all in your head?"

"I don't know, just... Just please don't tell the others, okay? They wouldn't understand."

"Eleven would," says Mike.

"She would?" Will hardly knows Eleven, but he knows she saved the town and that Mike always gets a faraway look in his eyes when he talks about her, like wherever she is, he's there with her.

"Yeah." Mike glances at him then looks away, quick as a blink, so Will turns back forward. "She always did. Sometimes I feel like I still see her. Like she's still around, but she never is. I don't know. Sometimes I feel like I'm going crazy."

He nods. "Me, too."

"Hey, well, if we're both going crazy, then we'll go crazy together, right?"

Will chuckles, and their eyes finally meet. It's the first time they've really looked at each other for this whole conversation, and Will suddenly feels like Mike can see *everything*, from his racing heart to the fear in his lungs to the monster in his head.

"Yeah," he agrees, voice wobbly. "Crazy together."

And the contact only holds for a few more seconds before they're breaking away and looking at their knees, at the table covered in candy, but Will wonders.

Maybe it's hero worship. Mike saved him from his worst nightmare come true, after all, and he's still sitting here, right next to him.

But then, he thinks, could Dustin or Lucas have saved him? Could Max? Could something about Mike—about Will's *feelings* for Mike—have to do with it?

Halloween of 1984 is the first time Will thinks about the Reagan sign on Mike's front yard and the ugly names he's been called for being small and dressing different and the thrill of being by Mike Wheeler's side.

It is certainly not the last.

The reason Will likes Max is that even though she could probably be the coolest kid in school with her skateboard and (scary, bigoted, yet somehow) popular brother, she doesn't choose to. Instead, she hangs around their little losers club, holding hands with Lucas and making fun of Mike and knocking her hip against Will's whenever he's being too quiet to try and make him smile.

And he also likes her because there's no way *she* sought *El* out, meaning El probably asked her for help or something, and instead of just sitting around and chatting, she took her for what seems like a whole day at the mall—new clothes, new smile, ice cream cones in the hands that aren't linked together.

It looks... well, it looks kind of like a date, even though Will knows that's just how girls are. But it isn't the photo strips tucked into their pockets or the tangled fingers that makes him think that way—it's Max's grin, genuine and delighted as El chews Mike out like she's discovering something new; it's El's unaffected demeanor as she dumps the boy she "loves".

Max would never hurt Lucas on purpose, but... well, accidents happen.

He watches now as Mike makes an indignant face at El's pointed "Why do you treat me like garbage?"

Will thinks that Mike does, objectively, treat El sort of like a pet, all condescending and possessive.

He also thinks, considering everything, that it's probably hypocritical of him to wonder if El ever wants more in life than Mike.

"I'm not trying to be a jerk, okay?" Mike says soothingly but unapologetically. "But we're not kids anymore. I mean, what did you think, really? That we were never going to get girlfriends? We were just going to sit in my basement all day and play games for the rest of our lives?"

"Yeah," says Will, tears stinging his eyes and anger flaring in his chest, watching Mike's face finally fall into some semblance of remorse with a twisted sort of satisfaction. "I guess I did. I really did."

He bikes off before Mike can formulate a retort.

He walks home the night of Dustin's homecoming alone, and expects to find himself alone in the house as well.

He's wrong.

He storms in, slamming the door shut, with the back of his neck tingling and the picture of Mike and El walking off burned into the

back of his eyelids and then stills when he sees Joyce standing in the kitchen, washing dishes.

"Bad day?"

Will huffs and leans against the counter next to the sink. "Mike keeps dragging El away and Lucas says it's because they're always making out."

Her eyebrows furrow. "And why's that annoying you?"

"Well, we never see Mike anymore, and I barely even know El because he never lets her hang out."

"Maybe it's because Hop's got rules!"

"Well, why'd he let her out in the first place, then?"

"I think you're jealous," she says, and taps his nose with a soapy finger. He grimaces.

"Jealous?" he asks, barely realizing his voice has gone up an octave. "Why'd I be jealous?"

"You feel like she's stealing your best friend away!" Her smile tilts mischievously. "Or you think El's pretty."

"I mean, she is pretty, but not like... that." *Not like Mike.*

"Not like Mike?" Joyce says.

Oh. He hadn't realized he said it aloud.

"You..." Her voice has gone soft and careful, the plate she's holding between her fingers starting to slip. Will grabs it and places it gently at the bottom of the sink, realizes with a start that the TV's still running. It sounds like Cheers, which means she's been thinking about Bob tonight, and silently chides himself for throwing this on her.

"Yeah."

She's quiet for a long second. He's not sure what he's expecting.

Then, turning to him with watery eyes and a big smile, she envelopes him into a hug, pressing her face into his shoulder and her wet hands into the back of his shirt.

"You'll always be my boy," she says, muffled, and he realizes with a start that his eyes are watering too.

"I know," he says back.

"And I guess I was right," she says, drawing away, "because you *are* jealous."

"Mom!" he whines, and punches her arm, and they laugh at the same time as the TV.

He feels more alive than he has in months.

"I'm just trying to demonstrate how careless Max is with Eleven's powers. In fact, how careless all of you are! You're treating her like some kind of machine when she's not a machine, and I don't want her to die looking for the flayed when they've obviously vanished off the face of the Earth. So can we *please* just come up with a new plan because I love her and I can't lose her again?"

The bitterness fills his throat and spills out through the seam of his lips as presses them together. He looks down at his bare knees and ignores the surprised and delighted faces he sees in his periphery in favor of counting freckles, goosebumps, fine hairs that haven't sprouted in yet like Mike's and Dustin's have. Because of course it's cause to celebrate, once everyone gets over the initial shock—Mike Wheeler, regular boy extraordinaire, in love with the most fantastic girl anyone has ever met.

He is choking and drowning and nobody can see.

He's not sure why he's surprised. It's like nobody has seen all summer, nobody except Mom and Jonathan, and isn't it wonderful that he has only the same two friends that he did before Mike came along? Isn't it

wonderful that Will's whole world revolves around Mike, always has since that day at the swingset?

He'd made Mike's whole year by saying yes, sure. But Mike has shaped all of Will's years since then, sculpted them like clay, and Will has wrapped around his fingers and molded to every one of his wants.

A door opens and someone walks out. Will finally looks up, but it doesn't bring him to the surface. He's still in too deep.

"What going on?" Eleven asks.

Oh, not much. Mike Wheeler loves you, by the way.

"Nothing, nothing!"

Jonathan meets Will's eyes. They've perfected speaking silently ever since Lonnie, and Will fully expects Jonathan to be saying *Can you believe it?* like Lucas would, like Max would, like Nancy would.

But not Jonathan. Jonathan still sees him.

All Will sees in his big brothers' eyes are *I'm so sorry*, and knows that Jonathan is dragging him out and trying to keep him afloat, and he suddenly feels foolish for thinking nobody would notice.

He supposes that the second Mike stopped noticing, it was like everyone else did too.

It is Christmas of 1983. Will is fresh out of the Upside Down and is seated in Mike's basement with Dustin and Lucas. Has been, for the past ten hours, actually, but that's more of a technicality.

What's important *right now* is the thessalhydra that Will has just defeated by rolling his fourteen. What's important is the way Dustin and Lucas parade around the room. In this moment, slapping his palms against his friends' in celebration, he finally feels like he's normal again, like the Upside Down has been wiped clear off his skin by their cheers and excited laughter.

"Whoa. Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa," says Dustin after Mike says his piece about cutting off heads. "That's not it, is it?"

"No, there's a medal ceremony—"

"Oh, a medal ceremony? What are you talking about?"

"Yeah, man," agrees Lucas. "The campaign was way too short."

"Yeah," says Will. He could stay here for hours longer, rolling the dice and listening to Mike's excited narration, but that's nothing new. What *is* is the unsatisfying ending. Mike never writes unsatisfying endings.

"It was ten hours!" he says defensively.

"But it doesn't make any sense!" Dustin says back.

"It makes sense!"

"Uh, no. What about the lost knight?"

"And the proud princess?" adds Lucas.

"And those weird flowers in the cave," Will says thoughtfully.

"I don't know, it's—"

The door opens and Jonathan comes down the stairs.

"Jeez, what's that smell?" he asks. "Have you guys been playing games all day or just farting?"

Lucas and Dustin start arguing. Will's gaze slides back over to Mike, whose smiles have seemed painted on and ingenuine for the entire ten hours, and jumps slightly when Mike is already looking at him.

But it's unnerving—Mike's not just looking *at* him. It's like he's looking clean through him, like he's searching for something he can't find, like...

Like he sees someone who isn't there.

In the hospital, his face had fallen when he brought up Eleven.

Will wonders if she's got anything to do with this now.

He thinks about it all the way up the stairs with Jonathan, and then when Nancy greets him with a gift and a kiss at the door, and then in the car ride home. He thinks a lot, now.

Before—

(he thinks of *before* far too much for being fresh out of the Upside Down but he just can't help it, not when everything was so much better before)

—he knew deep down that he was definitely Mike's favorite.

Now, though?

Now, he isn't so sure.

Will never quite gets used to the feeling of Mike looking at him, and how it comes with a mixture of *scaredguiltysadsorry*, and how desperate he is to make it all go away.

When he starts seeing flashes of the Upside Down, he wonders if this is how Mike feels when he looks at him now - just a flash of someone who isn't there.

After his argument with Mike, Will takes himself to Castle Byers.

It's not the greatest place to be in the pouring rain—there are gaps between all the wood panels, making it a lot more open-air than he'd care for—but if it was built in the rain, it can be used in the rain, and he settles on his cushion (the same one he'd curled up on when the Demogorgon had chased him, when Eleven had held his hand and told him his mom was coming and it felt more like a dream than reality, like Eleven was an angel visiting before he died) and flips open a comic book so he can distract himself.

He isn't reading, though. All he can see is Mike's exasperated face when Will called El stupid (even though he didn't mean it, because he hardly knows El but he does know she is caring and powerful and incredible, because he knows that he's been jealous since the day he lost Mike). He puts the book down with a sigh after about ten seconds of trying to convince himself to do anything but retreat into his head again and glances over at the walls.

Dungeons and Dragons. Ticket stubs. Empty paint tubes. Will the Wise.

It's ironic, really. Will was anything but wise when he decided to befriend Mike Wheeler. He was anything but wise when he fell in love and really believed that it could be the two of them against the world, even if they were two boys and it was the eighties and this stupid town was too small for how much he *felt* when Mike was around—thrilled, excited, angry, nervous.

He picks up that picture of the Party dressed as the Ghostbusters, and lets himself relive that day at Halloween.

Mike had... Mike was angry. Mike was angry and Mike had walked away.

Mike had walked away and Will, untethered, fell into his alternate universe, his worst nightmare.

And then Mike came back and scooped him into his arms and gave him empty promises and filled his mouth with sweetness and Will had let him, because Will would always let him, because Will would do anything to be by Mike's side.

He's angry, suddenly. His stomach twists and his skin is on fire and his brain is laser-focusing all his attention on that photograph.

"Stupid," he whispers, absently realizing he's crying, because it is. Everything is stupid. He is, his feelings are, Mike is, their delicate little Party, so quick to fall apart. All of them are. "So stupid."

He tears the picture in two, right down the center, between himself and Mike, and tosses it aside. He turns to the drawings tacked to the

walls, and yanks them down, too.

Will has been possessed by an interdimensional monster, but nothing that happened with the monster inside hurt more than now, and he relishes the angry heat and red haze as much as it makes his skin crawl with discomfort.

This isn't him, but it is. It's like instead of the Mind Flayer being the monster inside him, it's... himself.

It's like Will is his own monster, and instead of destroying Hawkins, he's destroying himself.

"So stupid. Stupid." It's all he can think to say. He grabs the baseball bat—oh, how he *loathes* that baseball bat and his father and every shitty memory associated with them—and uses it like a cane to stand himself up and hurl himself through the entrance he's long outgrown.

He only stares at Castle Byers a moment before he starts hitting—his swings are weak and they slip and he's about as good with a bat as he was with a hammer—but destruction is always easier than creation (*must be why everything's been falling apart so fast lately*, taunts that voice in his head that sounds like Mike and Lonnie and every bully Will's ever encountered in this stupid town, all together) and he hits repeatedly, over and over, until the little sign he'd painted himself unhinges and the wood is chipped enough for him to pry the front away. He tosses it aside, screaming all the while.

And then the heat disappears and he can feel every drop of rain against his back and the soreness in his throat and all he can do is collapse to the forest floor, body wracking with sobs.

If he opens his eyes now, all he will see is his world falling apart, the rain soaking the ruined remains of his childhood.

God. He misses being happy. He misses the onslaught of emotion when he was destroying, already, misses the hope he used to feel when Mike was around.

But it's not worth it to miss anything. Not now, when Castle Byers is destroyed and there's no way to turn back, no ticket to the days gone

by. He has bid the past farewell, for better or for worse, even though he's positive it's just going to get worse from here.

(But when Mike runs up and asks, desperately, if he's okay, Will thinks of the way his heart had come alive in his chest on Halloween when he did the same thing, and knows that he'll probably always be that stupid little boy who would follow Mike Wheeler wherever he wished.)

Will watches Mike and El flirt from afar in the hospital at first. He thinks it's ridiculous, considering they've been attached at the hip all summer long, that instead of saying things to Mike's face El lets candies fall through the vending machine and Mike hisses at Lucas confusedly about what it means.

They look but they don't see. Will sees even though he wishes he couldn't.

(Max sees, too, had hollered at Mike from the bathroom earlier, where she was locked in with El. At this point, she and Lucas are barely dating, anyways.

Speaking of Lucas—he had tried to apologize to him in the storage closet earlier, and Will was grateful for that, but it didn't feel right to accept it when Max's brother was possessed and all of Hawkins was in peril. Now, he wishes he had, wishes the air between him and all his friends wasn't so awkward.)

Mike hasn't apologized. Not to Will's face, at least.

Crazy together, huh?

The bitter taste that's been in his mouth whenever Mike and El are together in front of him since the Snow Ball comes back as Mike settles into the seat a few chairs away from his and directly adjacent to El's, but his heart starts thumping anyways, unbidden. He wakes up when Mike's around, no matter how much he wishes he could just slump over and fall asleep.

Dormant without the Mind Flayer, dormant without Mike Wheeler.

And his eyes track to Mike's, who tilts his head and raises his brows ever so slightly in a clear *could you leave us alone* expression, and the bitterness intensifies until it's like he's smelling it, feeling it, a tangible thing in his body.

He wants to scream, to shake his head, to sit still, but he has always orbited around whatever Mike wants.

Dormant without Mike Wheeler.

He stands up, feeling awkward and too-present. Max and Lucas are tossing M&Ms into each others' mouths, and Nancy and Jonathan are upstairs, and El and Mike are talking now, curled up closer than necessary on the uncomfortable hospital chairs.

He's a *seventh* wheel. Wonderful.

He listens to them make awkward small talk as he fiddles over by the sink and curls and uncurls his toes.

"Does your species like M&Ms?"

Because somehow Mike and El are together despite being worlds apart, and somehow that *works* for them.

"I like the new look, by the way. It's cool."

"Thanks."

There was no cosmic shift when they disagreed, no tip in the universe's scale.

Will is a flaming asteroid, burning as he flies through the air, but he flies in parallel to their perfect little world. They are never to intersect, never to meet.

But here's the thing: The Byers leave Hawkins, Indiana with El, the ladies in the U-Haul and the boys taking the car, leaving Nancy and Mike Wheeler, Dustin Henderson, Lucas Sinclair, and Max Mayfield standing in front of their house.

Here's the thing: Will Byers cries against the window and feels his brother's eyes on the side of his head but refuses to look at him.

Here's the thing: Will Byers is still achingly in love with Mike Wheeler, no matter how far he drives away from his gravitational pull.

Author's Note:

sfjkladf this is my first attempt at writing angst i am
so sorry if it isn't good
please drink water, wear a mask, and stay safe!!